
Georges Claraz – a Swiss naturalist in Argentina

The naturalist Georges Claraz (1832–1930) was one of the pioneers of the exploration of Patagonia and the study of its people. Although well-known at the time, his work has largely been forgotten but his name lives on in the species of Orthoptera dedicated to him by Henri de Saussure and Alphonse Pictet.

Georges (or Jorge) Claraz was born in Fribourg, Switzerland, in 1832. The eldest of eleven children, he studied natural sciences at the universities of Zürich, Freiburg im Breisgau (Germany) and Berlin. In 1857 he went to Brazil as assistant to Jakob Christian Heusser (1826–1909), his former teacher of mineralogy, who had been asked by the Swiss authorities to investigate the condition of certain Swiss settlers who had complained about unfair treatment. While travelling, they took the opportunity to study the natural history of the places they visited as well as writing reports for the Swiss authorities (Hux, 1975).

Claraz' criticism of the Brazilian government's treatment of slaves made them *personae non gratae*, and in 1859 they moved to Argentina and bought land near Bahia Blanca (Buenos Aires State). They were later joined by Antoine Claraz, Georges' younger brother. There they raised cattle, sheep and horses, and continued their natural history studies. Claraz soon came into contact with the Mapuche and Tehuelche peoples, learning something of their language and culture (Kradolfer, 2003). Heusser and Claraz published a number of scientific papers and newspaper articles based on their observations and experiences (see Claraz, 1927 and Schinz, 1931).

In 1865–1866 Claraz made a pioneering expedition into north-

ern Patagonia, between the Rio Negro and Rio Chubut, keeping a careful diary and collecting natural history and ethnographic material. Although the expedition diary was not published at the time, two versions have since been published with commentaries by Casimaquela (1988, 2008); the latter also includes Spanish translations of some other unpublished notes, information about the plants and vertebrates mentioned and some lexicographic information on the native languages Claraz studied. Claraz contributed material for several dictionaries of native languages published by other workers, and left many unpublished letters and notes (Hux, 1975).

Although Patagonia was brought to European attention by the publication of accounts of the first recorded circumnavigation of the earth by Ferdinand Magellan and Juan Sebastián Elcano (1519–1522), it remained relatively unknown, home to various native peoples and settlers of diverse origins and not part of any recognised state (despite the attempt by Orélie-Antoine de Tounens to create the Kingdom



of Araucania and Patagonia for himself). It was not formally divided between Argentina and Chile until 1881. Claraz' expedition was the first to examine the natural history of the region in which he travelled, and he recorded a lot of valuable information about the native cultures before the "Conquest of the Desert" in which the Argentine government took control of northern Patagonia in the 1870s and 1880s with a devastating impact on the indigenous people.

Although not in the same category as Darwin, Humboldt or d'Orbigny, Claraz deserves wider recognition because his interests were broad and his observations acute. Moreover, he shared his knowledge in a



(left) Syntype of *Diponthus clarazianus* Pictet & Saussure, (right) Syntypes of *Alcámenes clarazianus* Pictet & Saussure

wide correspondence with European and American specialists (Kradolfer, 2003) and collected an imposing body of material, sending many specimens to museums in Switzerland and Britain (Hux, 1975). These specimens were mainly from the area around Bahia Blanca and the Swiss settlement of San José (Entre Rios State), but some were collected during his Patagonia expedition or (in the case of some ethnographic and fossil material) procured from elsewhere.

One of Claraz' correspondents was Henri de Saussure, a prolific Geneva biologist specialising in the orthopteroid insects, who had a special interest in the American fauna having travelled widely in Mexico and the United States himself. Saussure described many species on the basis of specimens sent to him by Claraz, and named several in dedication. The grasshopper genus *Clarazella* Pictet & Saussure, 1887 was erected for *C. patagona* Pictet & Saussure, 1887, the type specimen having been collected during Claraz' Patagonia expedition. The other Orthoptera named after Claraz are *Alcámenes clarazianus* Pictet & Saussure, 1887, *Bufonacris claraziana* (Saussure, 1884), *Diponthus clarazianus* Pictet & Saussure, 1887, *Neocurtilla claraziana* (Saussure, 1874) and *Grylloides clarazianus*

(Saussure, 1874) (a junior synonym of *Anurogryllus muticus muticus* (De Geer, 1773)). In the Mantodea there is *Coptopteryx claraziana* Saussure, 1869, in the Blattodea *Blabera claraziana* Saussure, 1864 (a junior synonym of *Blaptica dubia* (Serville, 1838)) and in the Phasmida *Agathemera claraziana* (Saussure, 1868). Primary type material of all of these species is preserved in the Museum d'histoire naturelle in Geneva.

Other dedications include the wasp *Odyneurus clarazianus* Saussure, 1870 and the millipede *Odontotropis clarazianus* (Humbert & Saussure, 1869), as well as a number of plants (listed by Kradolfer, 2003).

In 1882 Claraz returned to Switzerland, where he remained in order to take care of his widowed mother. Heusser stayed in Argentina until his death in 1909 (Claraz, 1927). In 1896 Claraz retired to Lugano in the canton of Ticino, where he was visited by the famous Argentine explorers Francisco Moreno and Carlos Moyano. He died in 1930, leaving some of his money to fund travel and publication by natural scientists. The "Kuratorium der Georges und Antoine Claraz-Schenkung" (currently administered by the Swiss Academy of Sciences) also holds many of his personal papers. His memory is honoured in Argen-

tina where a village in Buenos Aires State was named after him.

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